



Non-Traditional Casting: An Open Letter

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Dear Members of the American Theater

We can continue to publish articles and special editions of magazines and write books; continue to have panel discussions, symposia, Colloquial and conferences; continue to air radio and television programs; continue to defend theses and doctoral dissertations; continue to debate and participate in one-on-one encounters; continue examining the "many and varied complexities of race," diversity, and inclusion in the arts in America.

But at some point we have to stop talking. At some point we have to realize that the issue "ain't that deep." When will that time occur? When? Either you actively participate in changing the American artistic landscape or you don't. Either you come out of the closet of your own racism and face it, or you wait for it to trip you up in yet another embarrassing moment, followed by media attention, controversy, and tacky apology, "I'm sorry that I revealed to you just how racist I am"--an apology everyone knows is less than sincere.

I no longer desire to "do lunch" and "discuss the possibilities" of working in theaters that have for years excluded me and other ethnic artists. I have been wine and dined from Maine to California, Washington to Florida. How much white wine can one drink?

Why do artistic and managing directors, educators, producers, and other decision makers love to talk about the changes they are making in their theaters and institutions? Isn't it action that we have come to accept as the driving force of good theater--action, not talk? Why has it taken so long for these so-called artistic leaders to identify and

implement the actions they should take? Stubbornness? Lack of creativity? Unconscious racism? Lack of dedication to their public expressions of commitment to change? Fear?

Why is it certain theater companies can only identify one or two ethnic directors and designers to work in their theaters? Usually one per season! Why does the hiring of this ethnic director preclude the hiring of others? Why is s/he hired to direct or design only the ethnically specific work? Is it a question of willful ignorance of the talent pool or finding one's level of comfort with an ethnic artist? Is it a belief that ethnic artists are not capable of creating beyond their own ethnicity? Is the black artist, the ethnic artist still being perceived monolithically--under the assumption that the one that is hired knows, and can express, the desires and urges of and for the entire race? Or are we being blacklisted because we continue to ask difficult, uncomfortable questions, to name names?

"We have our black/ethnic director that we work with; we know his/her work." I have been told this by many artistic directors or their representatives from the Denver Theatre Center and Berkeley Rep to the American Conservatory Theater American Conservatory Theater (A.C.T.) and far too many theaters in between. Why has the Roundabout Theatre hired one African American African director in the last ten years--Hal Scott, director of the critically acclaimed twenty-fifth anniversary production of *A Raisin in the Sun*? Did Charles Fuller truly have his finger on the pulse and thoughts of white America when he wrote in the Pulitzer Prize-winning *A Soldier's Play* the unforgettable truth expressed by the liberal-thinking, sincere, non-racist white Captain, "I just can't get used to it being in charge just doesn't look right on Negroes"?

Surely artistic directors can take time to "get to know," the work of the black and ethnic directors, playwrights, designers, and stage managers they consistently overlook. It seems that they do take the time for white artists. Many young white theater artists are immediately offered inclusion and acceptance (and, later, promotions) no matter how limited their experience--a practice most egregious on Broadway. Black and ethnic stage managers, for example, are rarely hired; and if they are, it is usually for black or ethnic productions. It seems that we are only viewed as "deputies for the colored." If these artists are fortunate enough to manage productions moving to Broadway, they are often replaced or demoted as a consequence of the move. Broadway producers often bemoan the fact that they can't find "good" or "experienced" black or ethnic stage managers. Yet there are quite a few who continue to seek employment. There are many more who refuse to work, knowing that the "glass ceiling" will quickly be reached and they will be replaced with white stage managers--quite often relatives or friends of the producers. A single recommendation from a white colleague still seems cachet enough to open doors for these replacements. How many recommendations, how many years of experience does the ethnic artist need? The "war stories" have remained constant over the past twenty years from productions as varied as *The Taking of Miss Janie* and *Eubie!* to *Smokey Joe's Cafe*

and *Bring in 'Da Noise, Bring in 'Da Funk* .

More than ten years ago, prior to the founding of the Non-Traditional Casting Project, I stated that black and ethnic artists had to be at least twice as good as their white counterparts just to be considered average. Things have not changed much since then; indeed, the need for ethnically specific institutions is far greater now. I will never forget the words of an artistic director of one regional theater during a Theatre Communications Group National Conference breakout session on diversity several years ago, "It's my theater; I can hire who I want!" It makes one wonder if certain members of the government, although misguided, were not partially correct in attempting to legislate art away from everyone. The words of my mother and many other mothers come to mind, "If you can't share, no one will play." The theater has become a playground for a handful of selfish white people who have made a killing, while the artistic urge in so many consistently excluded ethnic artists dies.

Tremendous change and a promise of new beginnings were anticipated after the appointment of a few ethnic and female artistic directors a few years ago. That promise, however, has yet to be realized. Hiring practices have remained the same. The seasons selected are cookie-cutter-perfect duplications of most theaters throughout the country. Few ethnic or female directors are employed to direct at these institutions, and those few are the usual suspects. The ethnic directors who may have outstanding qualifications--many times exceeding those of the artistic director--remain locked out of these ethnic institutions as well. Ego is a dangerous thing, especially if that ego has been born and bred in a climate of racism and intolerance. The talented, experienced ethnic theater artist has a long row to hoe with white and ethnic arts institutions.

Meanwhile, ethnic theater and culture are produced as new aesthetic and political avenues for white exploration. White artists are given the artistic freedom, or take the artistic license, to discover and present "new" interpretations of ethnically based work without accepting the tremendous responsibility to "tell it right" that such a task entails. Ethnic artists, on the other hand, who have long been creating the same type of work, remain locked out. These "new" offerings are quite often simplistically comprehended, conceptually and substantively bastardized, and thus made palatable for the larger (white) public. The legitimization of this "new" art is grounded in a narrow white populist perspective. The white viewer and reviewer find, and too often the work evokes, a return to the nostalgic past where we--black and ethnic folks--knew our places and therefore they--white folks--believed they knew us. This type of misguided cultural expropriation is little more than drive-by diversity.

With amazing speed, funding gold mines of "diversity dollars" have been created to support these prospecting, or missionary, efforts. "New audience" initiatives have resulted in substantial grants to large white institutions.

Smaller, culturally specific institutions have again been left out of the loop; application guidelines, particularly those regarding size of operating budgets, exclude most from applying. As an arts intern at the NEA, I was told by a government official in a moment of startling candor that ethnic institutions and artists "are not capable of handling those sums of money and are not being considered for this program at this time." This was more than fifteen years ago. I wonder how many programs since then have excluded artists because of race and ethnicity or other arbitrary designations.

Very passionate responses arise when grappling with these issues. If these responses are from ethnic artists, too often our passion is mistakenly labeled as anger. We are not the embodiment of a "good Negro"--acquiescent and subservient. I cannot recall the number of times I have been given the supposititious label "angry black man." Thus, the ideas that I and others who have been so conveniently labeled present are left unaddressed, and change stagnates.

If there is to be true change, a redirection needs to occur in the way race is discussed in America. Without it, we will never be able to tackle the seemingly complex, yet deceptively simple, issues of race and racism. This redirection involves a very simple idea: a thoroughgoing examination of "whiteness." As Ruth Frankenberg states in her landmark and controversial study *White Women, Race Matters: The Social Construction of Whiteness*,

The white Western self as a racial being

has for the most part remained

unexamined and unnamed. Most studies

of racial and cultural identities have

tended to view the range of potential

subjects of research as limited to those

who differ from the (unnamed) white

norm Whiteness and Westernness

have not been conceived as "the

problem" in the eyes of white/Western

people

An examination of "whiteness," its arrogance, conscious and unconscious, and its ability to make any different group "other," less than, or marginal will have tremendous impact upon all discussions of racism, cultural and gender politics, cultural imperialism, multi-culturalism, and diversity. This examination must be thorough. White people need to do this to and for themselves. The discourse must move beyond a simplistic postmodernist take on the subject--which usually results in a minor revision here and there, and then returns to narcissism--to include an examination of white male patriarchy and the imperialistic, nepotistic, and exclusionary legacy it has created and perpetuates. The data from this examination will be startling to some, "same ol'-same ol'" to others, but will frame the discussion and lead to a better understanding of the changes that need to occur. In short, the end of racism needs to become the white man's burden.

Yet, as the social reconstruction of whiteness proceeds and shifts to discussions and examinations of diversity, we must be very careful not to shroud ourselves in liberal tendencies not to notice color. This strategy of avoiding race--"I don't care if you are black, brown, white, yellow, red, green, or purple; I try to get along with everybody," or "When I look at you, I don't see color ... "---embeds meaningful differences among nonmeaningful ones. When was the last time you saw a purple person?

African American and ethnic artists know in what theaters they have been and will be perceived and used as Our Nig or The Spook Who Sat by the Door to get a diversity grant, fill a quota, "deal with the natives," "bring in the coloreds," or quiet the vigilant. Black and ethnic artists also know in what theaters "my white people," as my great-grandmother referred to some of her friends, are sincerely dedicated to creating change. One merely has to observe hiring practices and production histories. Sadly, there are no revelations.

Over the years I have submitted my name as a candidate for artistic director positions at theaters throughout the country. Several times I have been a finalist. When I asked the search committee or members of the board of directors of the theater if they were truly serious about considering a nonwhite person for the position, the responses were telling. Once the air returned to the room and the search committee recovered with "ahems," "err ... uhs," and the astonished "well ... ahs," someone--usually the lawyer on the committee--would respond with stock answers and

in measured tones full of the finest liberal phrases of the Civil Rights era, thoroughly conscious of the antidiscrimination legislation of the last few decades (recent Supreme Court rulings be damned). After these public positions were noted "for the record," the black or ethnic member of the search committee would be "designated" to discuss the matter with me, privately. I will always treasure these people for their frankness and commitment to ending racism and exclusion in these institutions and their communities. But they were too often solo voices in a sea of entrenched ideas--outnumbered and outvoted.

I often wonder what it will take to end racism within the cultural institutions of this country. I know this will not happen until racism and exclusion are eliminated within American society. Is the solution again to be found in the courts? With my limited knowledge of the law, the exclusion ethnic artists experience seems no different than the blatant segregation that was rampant several years ago. Being denied the use of a water fountain or access to the lunch counter because of race seems no different than the consistent lack of employment I and other ethnic artists experience with the arts institutions in this country. Whether overt or subtle, the exclusion is the same, a cancer that is eating away at the very fabric of this country, a disease that threatens my livelihood and existence. Maybe it is time to call in the lawyers and begin the excision process of this dreaded disease

I am frustrated by the struggle of finding work, weary of waiting for change, tired of writing about, commenting on, and experiencing racism and exclusion in the arts in America. But there is still much work to be done.

Sincerely,

Clinton Turner Davis

New York

Clinton Turner Davis, director, dramaturg, arts consultant, and educator, has directed productions for the Oregon Shakespeare Festival, Arena Stage, Cincinnati Playhouse, Trinity Rep, StageWest, Young Playwrights Festival, Negro Ensemble Company, American Place Theatre, GeVa, Milwaukee Rep, and WPA, among many others. His production of Joe Turner's Come and Gone (New Federal Theatre) received six AUDELCO awards; The African Company Presents Richard III (The Acting Company) received two AUDELCO awards (Direction and Ensemble Production); My Children! My Africa! (Dallas Theatre Center) received the Dallas Theatre Critics Award (Direction). He also directed the critically acclaimed A Soldier's Play for the Valiant Theatre and the world premiere of the Kennedy Center Fund for New American Plays finalist Homer G and the Rhapsodies, by Ifa Bayeza. He has been a guest lecturer at several universities, including Yale, Columbia, Berkeley, Ohio State, and Howard. Davis is a co-founder of the NonTraditional Casting Project, a 1997 TCG/Pew Fellow, and an associate

professor at The Colorado College.

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